

Historical vignette

The Medicine of the semi-god healer Chiron and the divine origin of the Medical art

Mourellou Evangelia, Tsoucalas Gregory

Department of the History of Medicine and Medical Deontology, School of Medicine, University of Crete, Heraklion, Greece

Abstract

The mythological creature Centaur Chiron, lived in the mountain Pelion in ancient Thessaly in Greece. Chiron was considered as the teacher of medicine for all ancient physicians, even for the god patron of medicine Asclepius. As a creature of the land, half horse, half man, knew about herbs, elixirs, knives (surgery) and music. Chiron as the son of Cronus had a divine origin and the perception of such a teacher supported the glorious origin of medical art.

Key words: ancient Greek mythology, Mount Dikte of Crete, Asclepius, religion.

Corresponding author: Gregory Tsoucalas, History of Medicine Department, School of Medicine, University of Crete, Greece. Voutes, 71003 PC, Heraklion Greece. Email: gregorytsoukalas@uoc.gr

According to Homeric tradition, the semi-god empiric healer Centaur Chiron, the just among the Centaurs, as described by Homer, was the son of Cronus and Philyra, the daughter of Apollo (1-8). Chiron was credited with introducing the first organized and renowned Medical School in Greece, situated in some enchanting location in Mount Pelion (9-12). He had married the nymph Naiad or Chariclo and had two daughters, Euipe, who was initiated into her father's art, and Ocyrhoe, who, as Ovid mentioned, besides practicing medicine, also engaged in Divination. Clement of Alexandria mentioned another daughter as well, Hippe, who had married Aeolus and taught him the "ancestral science" and natural theory (4, 13-17).

As known from Hellenic mythology, Zeus's father, Cronus, had severed the genital organs of his own father, Uranus, and had dethroned him. Fearing a similar fate from his own children, as soon as he became a father, he would swallow his offspring, as Hesiod recounted, "And one after the other, the great Cronus would swallow them, as soon as each one descended from the sacred womb of their mother (Rhea) to her knees" (Greek: καὶ τοὺς μὲν κατέπινε μέγας Κρόνος, ὥς τις ἕκαστος νηδύος ἐξ ἱερῆς μητρὸς πρὸς γούναθ' ἵκοιτο). Continuously, Rhea pleaded with her husband, trying unsuccessfully to convince him not to believe the prophecy, and was attempting in vain to persuade him to cease this original infanticide (18). Thus, when Rhea, the wife and sister of Cronus, was about to give birth to Zeus,

she sought refuge in a cave on Mount Dikte of Crete. There, in secret, she gave birth to the future god of gods and humans. To deceive Cronus, who demanded to devour the newborn, Rhea swaddled a stone instead of Zeus and offered it to him. Without suspecting a thing, Cronus ate the stone instead of his child (7). Later, Rhea entrusted the infant Zeus to Themis, who, in turn, handed him to the nurturer Amalthea, or the Curetes, the guards of "Idaeian Dactyls" (Greek: τοῖς Ἰδαίοις Δακτύλοις) who pounded their shields to drown out the cries of the infant Zeus so that Cronus would not hear them. There, Zeus enjoyed the care of the Meliae or Meliades Nymphs (1, 6-7, 10, 19-23). The goat Amalthea also nursed him. The Nymphs nurtured the newborn god, using Amalthea's horn as a nursing bottle, which thereafter became a symbol of abundance and of every desirable thing, receiving from Zeus the power and blessing of fruitful creation. The Nymphs Adrasteia and Ida would lull him to sleep until Zeus grew into manhood (10-11, 22, 24-30).

Once Zeus reached adulthood, Metis, daughter of Oceanus and Tethys and the first wife of Zeus, who knew more than all the gods and mortal humans prepared a nauseating potion, and unsuspecting, Cronus drank it. The effect of the potion proved miraculous and effective, as Cronus first regurgitated the stone and then all his children, those he had given birth to and swallowed before Zeus, meaning Pluto, Poseidon, Hecate, Hestia, Demeter, Hades and Hera. Impressed by the effectiveness of the potion,

Cronus decided to elevate one of his sons to the

role of a physician (7, 18, 22, 31).



Figure 1. Chiron and Achilles, amphora, ca 525-515 BC, Louvre Museum.

When he encountered the remarkably beautiful nymph Philyra, he fell in love with her. To conceal his identity, Cronus transformed into a horse and fathered a son with her, Chiron. In the year which followed, Chiron became the first physician (11, 16, 32).

Chiron was a bright healer and his medical knowledge was mentioned by both Homer and Pindar. Pindar had described Chiron as a creature who “had gentle hands in the art of a physician” (Greek: Φαρμάκων μαλακόχειρα νόμον). This wise seer, Chiron, possessed medicine and cultivated the first therapeutic plants. Chiron discovered numerous surgical techniques and therapeutic herbs (centaurion and chironion) (9-10, 13, 33-44), which he taught in his School along with Philosophy, Ethics, Astronomy, Divination, Magic, Music, Hunting and the Art of War, as a tutor of

men destined to rule or become leaders. His pupils included figures like Jason, Achilles, Peleus, and Hercules, while Xenophon had added Cephalus, Asclepius, Melanion, Nestor, Amphiaraos, Peleus, Telamon, Meleagros, Theseus, Hippolytus, Palamedes, Menestheus, Odysseus, Diomedes, Castor, Polydeuces, Machaon, Podaleirius, Antilochus, Aeneas and Achilles [Figure 1] (1, 4, 7, 10, 18, 42, 44-45). Above all he was mentioned as the first teacher of god Asclepius, the patron of medicine [Figure 2] (22, 46). It was said that Chiron had also trained some female healers, such as Circe and Medea (18, 47). Apollodorus noted that Chiron apart from botany he had been performing various surgical operations, as this when he operated Phoinix, who was suffering from a refractory eye disease (7).



Figure 2. Apollo entrusting Chiron with the education of Asclepius, engraving by Hendrick Goltzius 1558-1617

According to Pindar's testimony, Chiron was healing his patients with Music (soft tunes), complete sweetness, and gentleness, "he relieved each one of his sufferings, some with soothing incantations, caring for them softly, and others with calming elixirs, or by anointing their limbs with healing ointments. And some, with a single cut, he set upright (Greek: ...λύσαις ἄλλον ἀλλοίων ἀχέων ἔξαγεν, τοὺς μὲν μαλακαῖς ἐπαιδαῖς ἀμφέπων, τοὺς δὲ προσανέα πίνοντας, ἢ γυίοις περάπτων πάντοθεν φάρμακα, τοὺς δὲ τομαῖς ἔστασεν ὀρθούς). The lyre and the surgical knife were wedded to him. Indeed, he was a distinguished surgeon, according to Pindar's testimony (7, 13, 16).

For a physician to connect with a lineage from centaur Chiron was considered as the most significant factor to enter history as a majestic figure in Hellenic Mythology [48]. Chiron was nominated as the father-teacher of "all" ancient

physicians. This myth, associated with the divine birth of the first healer, signifies nothing more than the noble, divine, godly origin of the art of medicine.

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